

Special Forces on Okinawa:

At Freedom's

Story by Heike Hasenauer

ON the island of Okinawa, some 250 soldiers of the 1st Battalion, 1st Special Forces Group — part of the Joint Special Operations Command, Pacific — operate out of a former National Security Agency listening post at the Army's Torii Station.

The site accommodates three line companies, each with six SF teams, said assistant S-3 CPT Ian Rice. Together they comprise the forward

battalion of the Fort Lewis, Wash.-based 1st Special Operations Group.

The 1st Bn. is the only Army combat battalion in Japan. And, as its motto implies, it is "Proudly Serving Our Nation at the Forward Edge of Freedom."

The SF teams typically spend roughly six months of the year deployed, said SSG Keith Pace. He's been stationed on Okinawa for a year and a half, and in that time has deployed to Thailand and Alaska, as well as attending both Jump Master School and Scuba School.

The battalion supports U.S. Pacific Command's peacetime engagements, among them training with other countries' forces, special forces and border police in the Pacific region. Training for contingencies includes a scenario of theater war in Korea.

Because there's no Army aviation element on the island, "every mission we conduct is supported by joint-forces air assets," Rice said. A two-man Air Force special operations weather team provides the critical data SF teams use in planning airborne and maritime operations.

For training purposes, the battalion uses a drop zone on nearby Ie Shima island, where Pulitzer-prize-winning journalist Ernie Pyle died during the Okinawa Campaign of World War II.

SF teams conducting maritime operations swim, use zodiac boats and employ HALO (High-Altitude, Low-Opening) parachuting. The latter allows them to leave the aircraft at 25,000 feet and land within 75 feet of their objectives, said MSG Will Adams, the battalion's HALO team operations sergeant.

Training for scuba-team members includes "mother-ship" operations and the use of kayaks. The teams also practice fast-rope insertion techniques and military free-fall parachuting.

"This is the best tour you can have as an SF soldier," said Adams, who was also assigned to the unit from 1988 to 1992.

For divers, some of the locations and sights off Okinawa are unparalleled, Adams said.

Being forward-deployed is another advantage to the island assignment. "Fort Lewis soldiers who deploy to Thailand, for example, suffer from jet lag when they arrive," Adams said. "When we get there, we're fresh."

Besides providing foreign internal defense, the battalion conducts counterdrug missions in the northern region of Thailand.

"We're talking about training counterdrug forces," Rice said. "We teach small-unit tactics." Those include ambush techniques against



Okinawa-based SF soldiers deploy on a rotating basis to conduct a range of missions, including teaching small-unit tactics to counterdrug forces.

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heavily armed drug runners at very remote borders. The SF teams also provide medical training for border police.

Through the battalion's demining program, SF teams taught demining operations to indigenous forces between 1994 and 1997. That training, Rice said, should resume soon in Vietnam and Cambodia.

Among the unit's other missions is search and recovery of World War II remains in Papua New Guinea, providing medical training in Vietnam, and conducting security assistance training in the Philippines, Rice said.

In 2000, following the eruption of Mayon Volcano in the Philippines, the battalion also helped displaced and injured personnel by setting up tents and evacuating citizens to safety.

"Since we're forward-stationed, we can deploy easily to Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia and Australia, among other places," Rice said.

"We conduct unconventional warfare, what was originally known as guerilla warfare," Rice added. "There's a mindset of creative problem-solving to engage or counter a threat. The idea is: 'You can't do what you've always been told. You have to be creative.'

"Our planning is 'bottom-driven' — with some constraints, of course — as opposed to coming from higher

headquarters," Rice explained. The SF soldiers have to determine the best way to accomplish a given mission, based on the mission and logistics constraints.

The mission could be counter-insurgency, for example, Rice said. "A conventional commander may want to shell or bomb a village. Our take is, 'If you do that, you'll make more recruits for insurgents, and you'll kill civilians.'

"We want to influence the population by not doing things that alienate

it," Rice said. "We want people to know we're there to help, not hurt them. SF training is therefore geared largely toward increasing soldiers' awareness of the culture and language of various countries."

Being friendly and forthcoming are important in cementing friendships, Rice said, "so that when we see another country's soldiers during a repeat training mission, or in answer to a real-life contingency, they'll know us. The first time we go into a country can't be when there's a crisis." □



Soldiers of the 1st Bn., 1st SF Grp., prepare to board a helicopter that will take them to an island training area in the East China Sea.

Heike Hasenauer